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ASSURING DEMOCRATIC ELECTION OF COOPERATIVE DIRECTORS

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FARMER COOPERATIVE SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

**Farmer Cooperative Service
U. S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, D. C. 20250**

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The Farmer Cooperative Service conducts research studies and service activities of assistance to farmers in connection with cooperatives engaged in marketing farm products, purchasing farm supplies, and supplying business services. The work of the Service relates to problems of management, organization, policies, merchandising, product quality, costs, efficiency, financing, and membership.

The Service publishes the results of such studies; confers and advises with officials of farmer cooperatives; and works with educational agencies, cooperatives, and others in the dissemination of information relating to cooperative principles and practices.

Educational Circular 21

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Foreword

This is one of a series of circulars on the effectiveness of cooperative directors, based on information developed during the 1964 series of member relations conferences sponsored jointly by Farmer Cooperative Service and the American Institute of Cooperation. The theme of the conferences was **The Director's Role in Member Relations**.

This circular is intended to stimulate thinking rather than to give specific answers to problems. The ideas expressed represent opinions of responsible cooperative leaders, educators, and others, based for the most part on their own experiences in day-to-day operating situations.

Much of the material was taken from speeches given at the 1964 member relations conferences, or from ideas brought out during discussion periods.

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Assuring Democratic Election of Cooperative Directors

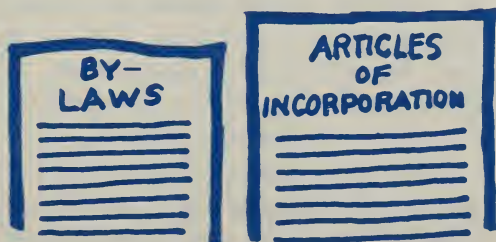
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“Cooperatives are economic democracies.” This catchy phrase is often heard from speakers at cooperative member meetings. That cooperatives are economic institutions is generally accepted.

But are they democratic economic institutions? If so, what makes them democratic? Just what practices guarantee their democratic nature in the selection and election of directors?

There is substantial agreement among cooperative leaders that true democracy is possible but is not always achieved. In this publication we will report some methods cooperatives use to assure democratic election of directors and some comments of agricultural and cooperative leaders with regard to the effectiveness of these methods.

Prerequisites for Democratic Control



“Democratic control is probably the most important and far-reaching principle of economic cooperation. It restricts voting power so that the people can rule. When fully understood, it is the greatest source of strength in a cooperative. But it demands personal involvement by large numbers of people, which is difficult to achieve.” These are the words of the president of an association of cooperatives.

Democratic election of directors is vital to democratic control but the first step in this process is not marking the ballot. Nor is it nominating candidates. These are the final steps.

First there must be legal framework for establishing democratic control.

And second there must be an informed electorate. Members must know the importance of democratic control and be willing to work for it.

Legal Framework

Articles of incorporation and bylaws usually define the manner in which directors shall be elected—who may serve, method of selection, who may vote, and the duties and responsibilities of those elected. This is one assurance of democratic control.

State statutes also lay down specific ground rules for cooperatives. The Cooperative Marketing Act of North Carolina, for example, includes provisions for voting and specifies the number, duties, powers, and terms of office of directors.

Within such legal bounds, cooperatives set up their procedures for selecting directors democratically.

Well-Informed Membership

The cooperative leaders and educators listed in the foreword agree that education is essential to democratic elections. One manager says, "A well-informed membership is familiar enough with the cooperative and its functions to know and appreciate the relationship of member to cooperative and cooperative to member. A well-informed membership will attend the regular or specially called business meetings and vote intelligently in the election of directors. Such a membership's knowledge of and interest in the cooperative assures the selection of the best qualified members for election to the board of directors through a democratic process."

Directors should "foster better understanding of the whole nature of cooperatives," another leader says—and adds this admonition, "The entire member relations program should be directed toward achieving greater interest and participation by members in their organization, not fooling them into ignorant contentment. This calls for giving members sufficient and accurate information about the cooperative."

In other words, members must have a background of general information on the cooperative before they can make an intelligent evaluation of the qualifications of candidates for directors.

Who Chooses Nominee?



Assuming, now, that a cooperative has legal framework for democratic control and that the membership is well informed—the next step is nominating qualified members to serve on the board of directors.

This is most commonly done through a nominating committee. Some cooperatives, however, call special meetings to nominate directors, and some solicit nominations by mail.

Usually nominations also may be made from the floor at the time of the election.

Nominating Committee

“Effective use of a nominating committee is a valuable tool for assuring greater democracy in selecting directors,” a cooperative official says.

Most cooperatives apparently agree with him. In Indiana, for example, a recent survey showed that 85 percent of the cooperatives have nominating committees.

Who Serves?

In discussing the makeup of the nominating committee, the manager of the membership relations department of a cooperative says, “. . . the nominating committee should normally be member patrons of the cooperative. Some committees do include one or more directors . . . However, the selection of candidates should best be left in the hands of the members.

“There are some cooperatives who follow the practice of having a public official appoint a public member to the nominating committee in addition to those patron members who are elected or appointed. This practice has considerable merit in that rather well qualified people are likely to be selected . . .”

Speaking on the same subject, a cooperative manager says, “The selection of a nominating committee whose members have a personal interest in the affairs of the cooperative, who have known ability, and who will justify their nomination by giving their reasons for their selection can do much to assure the election of capable directors.”

Guidelines for Selection

An extension economist suggests these guidelines for selecting a nominating committee:

1. The committee should be formed before the annual business meeting.
2. Directors, manager, and staff members should not be on the committee.
3. Former directors often make good members for the nominating committee.
4. The nominating committee should consist of a minimum of three, and a maximum of five, members.
5. The nominating committee must be familiar with provisions of the State law and the bylaws of the cooperative.

Elected or Appointed?

The Indiana survey referred to earlier in this circular showed that 89 percent of the cooperatives in the State had nominating committees appointed by the board or the chairman. Some cooperative leaders strongly support, however, the idea that it is more democratic to elect the nominating committee.

Here are selected opinions:

“. . . A nominating committee . . . elected by the membership at the annual meeting . . . leaves control in the hands of the member-patrons and gives the nominating committee a full year to come up with a slate of candidates. Another method which is less desirable is to have the board of directors appoint the nominating committee. This system tends to keep the control in the hands of the elected directors and to perpetuate the people who are in ‘power’.”

“. . . The nominating committee consists of one board member (chairman) and two non-board members who are selected by the board.”

“If the board itself appoints the nominating committee, this . . . can be a smooth way to perpetuate control by a clique, or small group. Members should be informed as to who serves on the nominating committee, which should be selected far enough ahead of the annual meeting to allow careful selection of candidates. Finally, the committee should be selected by the members themselves and then be given considerable freedom in doing its job.”

“When a nominating committee is used, it should be selected by the membership—perhaps elected at the previous annual meeting. Selection by the board as a whole may be acceptable, but it appears that selection by the management, by the chairman alone, or by the directors whose terms are expiring should not be permitted.”

“One way of assuring election of capable directors is . . . a nominating committee . . . elected by the cooperative membership a year in advance or appointed by the entire board of directors long enough before the election to give the membership time to make their preference known to the committee, and long enough to give the committee time to make the best selection.”

Other Nominating Methods

In some cooperatives, members nominate directors at meetings called especially for that purpose. This may be done on a district basis.

Let's look at the system one association uses.

In November of each year the association magazine carries a notice of district meetings for nomination of directors. (One-third of the districts choose directors each year.) These meetings are held in December.

The meetings are well publicized. Branches within the districts put out notices and distribute luncheon and prize tickets. Drivers making deliveries to members help promote the meeting. Press releases go to local papers.

The December issue of the association magazine gives more details about the meetings and includes an article on the obligations a member assumes when he indicates his willingness to be a candidate.

Actual nominations are handled thus. A member who wishes to place a name in nomination uses a standard form. He signs the form himself and obtains the signatures of the prospective nominee and four active members who endorse the nomination. The completed form is filed before the meeting.

No more than five members may endorse a nomination. This prevents supporters vying with one another to get long lists of sponsors for a candidate and thus turning the nominating procedure into a popularity contest.

A land-grant college economist recommends direct nomination. "The nominating process in local associations should be open to the entire membership through some arrangement for receiving nominations by mail ahead of the annual meeting at which the election is to be held. This can be accomplished by mailing each member a nominating ballot which must be returned by some specified date . . . The nominating committee has the responsibility for receiving and counting these ballots and for presenting to the electorate a prescribed number of nominees, no fewer than two for each vacancy."

Cooperative leaders recommend that nominations from the floor be permitted and members be encouraged to nominate in this fashion if they are not satisfied with the names presented to them. This is one of their rights as members.

How Candidates Are Selected



As one cooperative manager points out, "No part of cooperative management is more important than the board of direc-

tors. They are responsible for selecting the hired manager, for determining the general management policies of the cooperative, and for seeing that these policies are put into operation.”

It therefore behooves the nominating committee to do its job well. If the cooperative uses another method of nomination, it is up to the members to evaluate possible candidates and to select those best qualified to serve. This should not be a last minute, off-the-cuff decision.

Whether members should be offered the names of more candidates than there are vacancies is open to debate. But many believe that a slate with more names than vacancies is desirable.

“I appreciate the position that a committee should make a selection of one candidate for each vacancy and support this person for election,” one cooperative leader says.

“However, the weakness of this position is that too often the selection of a single candidate in effect means the nominating committee has elected this person to the directorship. Membership tends, then, with only a single nominee to vote for the candidate nominated. The advantage of having two candidates is that the membership has to conduct an election and make the selection.”

“Two or more candidates should be nominated for each vacancy so that members have a chance to make a choice when voting,” a cooperative manager believes.

And an extension economist agrees. “It is desirable that the nominating committee name more candidates than there are vacancies on the board.”

The Indiana survey showed that 81 percent of the cooperatives in that State named an average of more than one candidate for each vacancy.

Bylaw Requirements

In considering potential candidates, the nominating committee or general membership must first determine that they meet bylaw requirements.

Some cooperatives specify in their bylaws that directors be apportioned according to district or area, thus insuring geographical representation for all members. Sometimes each district nominates its own candidate.

The theory back of this, as explained by an association using the district system, is that “members have a pride in having someone from their community on the board of directors and it makes them feel they are an important part of the organization . . . If an assignment is given to a director to do a certain job in the community . . . he feels it his responsibility to get the job done.”

Representation also may be determined by volume of business done with the cooperative within an area. One coopera-

tive that apportions directorships by districts on the basis of number of members and volume of business reviews the apportionment every 5 years.

Bylaws sometimes limit the number of years or terms directors may serve.

Other Considerations

In actual practice, even though bylaws do not require that various areas or groups be represented on the board of directors, these factors usually are considered in selecting nominees.

“A democratically selected board should have balance,” an agricultural economist states. “Consideration should be given to (1) geographic areas, (2) different interests (3) various commodities and services, and (4) different age groups.”

Too, each prospective nominee should be looked at as an individual. What training has he had for the job of director? What sort of a person is he? What will he contribute to the board?

Members With Special Training

Some cooperatives have advisory boards or committees that work closely with the directors. Members serving in this capacity often are regarded as top prospects when new directors are being selected.

We quote here from three cooperative leaders who recommend this.

“An all important contributing factor to a better prepared membership for the assumption of official responsibilities as directors is a well-planned, continuous program of membership education. One important area . . . is an advisory committee, members of which have been carefully selected by the board of directors from the cooperative membership and appointed to serve for a definite time . . . Directors elected from such a committee have served as outstanding members of the board.”

Another says, “A few cooperatives have an excellent system of . . . training members in understanding the operation of the cooperative. This is accomplished through ‘Board Advisory Committees’ which take care of some of the member relations . . . They do this by studying and investigating present and future needs of the cooperative. Detailed studies can become excellent guides for decisions that the board may make . . . The knowledge gained by serving on the ‘Board Advisory Committee’ creates understanding which is always helpful to future board members.”

And a third, speaking of selecting associate directors and training them, says, “Each board member selects one co-op member to serve with him for 1 year—preferably a young farmer. He attends all meetings of the board, special membership meetings, and serves on committees.

“In his year of service he takes part in the discussion at all board meetings and gives talks at special membership meetings. He is limited in one thing—he has no vote in the directors’ meetings.

“If I were to pick one method for selecting and training future directors of a cooperative, appointing associate directors is the method I would choose.”

Personal Qualifications

Personal qualifications of prospective nominees also need to be evaluated. This is not always easy, particularly in a large association where everyone does not know everyone else.

In one cooperative that solicits recommendations for nominees from local districts, a member of the nominating committee visits each person suggested to judge his qualifications and to secure his consent to be a nominee if he is selected.

The board manual of one cooperative lists desirable characteristics for board members. An official of that association says, “I feel if we understand what kind of a candidate we are looking for, we are more likely to be successful in getting this kind of a person.”

Here is the list—slightly condensed.

1. Will he have time to serve? Will he attend meetings?
2. Will he use products and services of the cooperative?
3. Does he have conflicting interests? Will he be in competition with the cooperative? Will he support principles adverse to the cooperative?
4. Does he support the cooperative movement?
5. Does he seek the position or does the position seek him?
A cooperative owes no man a job.
6. Are his views similar to those of the majority he represents or are they a radical departure?
7. Will he support the decisions of the board? Will he criticize the majority of the board if he disagrees?
8. Is he a yes man? Will one or two strong men control his thinking and his vote?
9. Will he place himself under obligation to the employees?
A man under obligation to another is not absolutely free in his thinking.
10. Will he interfere with the manager or employees in carrying out policies of the board?
11. Will he study the articles and bylaws?
12. Will he study and understand the value of items on the balance sheet and operating statement?
13. Will he seek special privilege?
14. Can he stand criticism?

This can be a useful checklist for nominating committees seeking candidates and also for members voting on nominees.

When bylaws do not limit the number of years or terms directors may serve, it is sometimes difficult for a nominating committee or the general membership to change the complexion of the board without offending directors whom they would like to retire.

On the other hand, when bylaws do prescribe compulsory rotation, the best men on the board may be forced off along with the deadwood.

We quote from two cooperative leaders who are concerned over directors staying on the board too long.

“Most of us have been to meetings where year after year the same directors are nominated and elected by acclamation. The only way new blood gets on the board is when an old director resigns or moves on—and even then the remainder of the board fills the vacancy by appointment. Thereafter, this appointed person is elected by the traditional practice of having the secretary cast a unanimous vote.”

And a second comment: “All of us are acquainted with too many cooperatives in which the board has become frozen and year after year passes without a new face. A board without new members will become a board without new ideas. That can be tragic to the cooperative. Many directors, once elected, are removed only by death.”

Proponents of compulsory rotation claim these advantages: (1) New directors bring new ideas and new perspectives to bear on old problems; (2) membership on a board of directors is a privilege, a responsibility, and an honor that should be shared by all members; (3) serving as a director helps develop leadership qualities in a larger number of members and also makes them better acquainted with operations of the cooperative.

Now for the arguments on the other side of the question. (1) Automatic rotation restricts the reelection of competent directors; (2) it is a limitation on the democratic right of members to elect anyone to office; (3) in some associations, not enough members are qualified to serve as directors to permit rotation.

This quotation gets to the heart of the problem. “An experienced, able director should be better than an inexperienced man with equal native ability. To retire a man from the board just because his allotted time has expired may cost the association the services of a member who is especially useful *because* of his length of service and intimate knowledge of details of association organization and operation. The loss entailed by compulsory rotation can far outweigh any possible gain.”

Whether or not to limit tenure of office is a problem in many organizations that must be faced realistically.

Acquainting Members with the Candidates



After nominees are selected and before the election is held, cooperatives have an important member relations job to do—that is, acquainting members with the candidates. Members cannot be expected to vote intelligently unless they know the qualifications of the nominees.

The responsibility for getting this information to the membership may be assigned to the nominating committee, to the member relations committee, to the present board of directors, or to the management.

Cooperative leaders generally recommend that a biographical sketch of each nominee be mailed to members before the election. Along with the usual information about the age, education, and community activities—this sketch should include an outline of the nominee's farming activity, size of his farming operation, patronage with the association for the preceding year, and names of his sponsors (if this is part of the nominating procedure).

Cooperatives with newsletters, newspapers, or magazines find these excellent channels for getting these data out to members. A special letter can serve the same purpose.

Receiving this information in advance enables members to study the nominations carefully. If they are not satisfied, they then have an opportunity to consider other possible candidates to be nominated directly at the annual meeting.

Occasionally, a regular election campaign may develop—which can be either good or bad. One cooperative leader's comment on this is: ". . . in a few instances we have political campaigners who attempt to interfere with free choice, but, we must admit, this too is democracy in action."

Another believes strongly that "the manager and paid employees should not be allowed to campaign for a director or potential director" but that the membership list should be available to any member who wishes to seek a board post.

Election Procedures



"An election conducted in compliance with principles of parliamentary law in a manner that will give the voting mem-

bership every privilege allowed it is the final step in democratic selection of capable directors," so says one manager.

But just arranging a time and a place for the election, determining who may vote, and counting the ballots are not enough. An agricultural economist expresses his views on the director selection procedures this way: ". . . cooperatives operate or profess to operate according to democratic principles. How do they measure up in this respect? . . . Too many are found wanting."

With these comments in mind, we shall report in this section on some of the election procedures that cooperatives have found successful—and some that leaders question.

The Annual Meeting

Almost all cooperatives elect directors at their annual meeting. The Indiana survey showed that only one cooperative in that State did otherwise.

This is democratic in practice only if a high percentage of the members exercise their right to vote. As the president of one association says, "You cannot select directors democratically unless informed people are there when the vote is taken."

Attendance

Many cooperatives have trouble arousing enough interest among members to get them to come to the annual meeting. Again we quote the Indiana survey—"The average attendance of members at annual meetings was only 17 percent with 29 percent of the cooperatives having an attendance of 10 percent or less."

Careful planning, good publicity, and a strong member relations program can do much to promote attendance. Newsletters and cooperative publications can be used effectively.

"Unfortunately, interest in the business affairs of the association often is not great enough to attract a large percentage of members . . .," an agricultural professor comments. "This situation has led many associations to swell the attendance through entertainment, door prizes, and like inducements. Distribution of patronage refund checks by successful associations frequently is an added attraction."

A possible solution to the low attendance problem is offered by the president of a statewide cooperative. "Cooperatives which are too large to accommodate members satisfactorily at a single meeting might consider holding two or more meetings in different parts of the area served."

Another cooperative reports success with this plan. "In our widely separated areas, by holding individual unit meetings we have very good attendance and very lively . . . elections for each director, and also frequent changes that are usually improvements to the board . . . We seem to be getting the best leadership from each of the communities."

Hazards to Democracy

The secretary of a cooperative says this about an association he observed. "... with the system of one large annual election and dinner meeting, it was too much of a temptation for someone to jump up and propose that the present board be reinstated and before anything else could be done, this was seconded and the election was over."

And this, "All of us have been to too many annual meetings where the election of directors was the last item on the program. At this point, nearly everyone is tired and some have gone home. What happens? Nominations are made with the goal of electing anyone . . . Many times to avoid having an election, and thus using more time, a motion is made for nominations to cease and the candidates nominated make up the slate of new directors."

Who Votes?

While most cooperatives follow the one member-one vote principle, there are some differences of opinion as to the mechanics. And there are cooperatives that believe cumulative or share voting to be more equitable and more truly democratic.

One Member - One Vote

On first thought, the term "one member-one vote" seems simple. Yet, apparently questions can arise concerning its meaning. "Does the one member-one vote rule mean the husband, his wife, and the several children are all handed ballots if they all happen to be in the audience?" a president asks. "This can make a mockery of democratic business."

Proxy voting is permitted by some cooperatives, forbidden by others. One opponent to this practice explains his position thus. "We should seriously consider the practice of proxy voting—it is doubtful if such voting has a place in cooperatives. I will not try to spell out all the dangers other than to say getting somebody's proxy is oftentimes just as easy as getting a signature on a petition. Nobody wants to turn you down. And besides, if you've signed a proxy, you have another excuse for not going to the annual meeting."

Cumulative and Share Voting

A teacher believes that cumulative voting might be a way to give representation on the board to minority groups. Here is what he says, "Another viewpoint of democratic selection is concerned with the opportunity for minority groups to be represented on the board of directors. Those holding this viewpoint feel that the essence of democracy is not majority rule but the right of the various interests in our economic,

social, and political institutions to express themselves and have a voice in the decisions made.

"The problem, particularly in local associations, is determination of the various interest groups which should be recognized. Young farmers often feel that they represent one of these minority groups. In one member-one vote associations, the large farmer-operator may feel that his interests are subordinated while in the association where the voting is by shares, as in Illinois, the small farmers may feel disadvantaged. Operators of specialized farms often find little in common with the more numerous general farmers.

"Since it is extremely difficult to set up a classification of directorships in local associations to recognize such varied interests, the most practicable solution is to provide for cumulative voting . . . Thus if three directors are to be elected from six or more nominees, each member may cast his three votes for any one of these nominees. By this means, a substantial minority would be able to elect one director."

Some cooperatives do vote by shares, but the practice draws this critical comment from the president of a State council. "I believe directors should be elected by people—not property. By this I mean we should preserve the time-tested one member-one vote principle. This is so because, I believe, we agree cooperatives by nature are, and should continue to be, democratic organizations. The people are not really free to rule themselves in any organization, system, or society where dollars outvote men, nor do they long control events."

Balloting

Some cooperatives think they get a better expression of opinion if the election is conducted by mail. One association, for example, mails a ballot listing the names of all candidates to each member at least 10 days before the annual meeting. The member marks his ballot, seals it in a special envelope, and then puts this into a second mailing envelope bearing his name.

A committee meets the day before the annual meeting to open and count the ballots. Results are reported to the general membership at the meeting.

It is more common, however, for voting to be done at the meeting, either by written ballot or by voice vote. It is recommended that all nominees be introduced before the balloting starts.

If two or more directors are to be elected and there are more nominees than vacancies, one cooperative leader suggests that they should be elected one at a time, rather than as a group. He also urges that, in all instances, voting be by secret ballot.

"Education is the main factor in influencing democratic

control of a cooperative," in the words of one cooperative leader.

This publication has emphasized the importance of education and a strong member relations program in nominating and electing directors democratically. But directors cannot be expected to know instinctively how best to meet their new duties and responsibilities. Again, education is the key to success.

A companion publication in this series on directors discusses post-election training programs for directors.

Other Publications Available

Creating Training Programs for Cooperative Directors. Educational Circular 22. Irwin W. Rust.

Using Directors To Strengthen Member Relations. Educational Circular 23. Irwin W. Rust.

Managing Farmer Cooperatives. Educational Circular 17. Kelsey B. Gardner.

Improving Management of Farmer Cooperatives. General Report 120. Milton L. Manuel.

Directors of Regional Farmer Cooperatives—Selection, Duties, Qualifications, Performance. General Report 83. David Volkin, Nelda Griffin, and Helim H. Hulbert.

Bylaw Provisions for Selecting Directors of Major Regional Farmer Cooperatives. General Report 78. Helim H. Hulbert, David Volkin, and Nelda Griffin.

“Mr. Chairman—” Information 6.

Membership Practices of Local Cooperatives. General Report 81. Oscar R. LeBeau.

Making Member Relations Succeed. Information 32. Irwin W. Rust.

A copy of each of these publications may be obtained upon request while a supply is available from—

**Farmer Cooperative Service
U. S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, D. C. 20250**